Reality distorted open standards

Tuesday 9 February 2010 16:10

While I agree when ppk says the iPhone is an obsession, I believe the iPhone isn't the root of the problem.

What is going on here is only slightly related to the iPhone and the mobile web. The big picture is that in the last decade web developers have gotten used to being able to more or less easily install a pretty complete collection of desktop browsers to test and debug the code they create. Most of these browsers are open source, cost no or only a small amount of money to obtain and by using a combination of OS X and virtual machines you can get away with all that without an investment in extra hardware. All the hardware an average web developer needs is a single Mac.

As soon as the use of the web moves away from the desktop it is no longer possible to get away with a single Mac. Game consoles have browsers, but are web developers going to start buying sets of XboXes, PlayStation 3's and Wii's just to test their code in them? And when television sets and cars are equipped with browsers, are they going to buy those to test their code in them? No, because they realize what they do for free with software suddenly gets very expensive when hardware is involved. Most web developers won't spend serious money on hardware for testing purposes, so the only hardware they have available for testing beyond the desktop browsers is what they have already around, which in most cases is their iPhone.

But wasn't HTML intended to allow authors to just create a page that should be usable on a variety of platforms without having to worry about the differences between those platforms? Yes, but the confidence that HTML code could be easily tested in almost every desktop browser has turned the web developing blogosphere into a demo−scene. That demo−scene web development isn't about building a rock solid site that tries to do what HTML intended, it's about pushing a small set of browsers to their limits to try to achieve something others can't, in a way that is more like abusing HTML than actually using it. It's abusing the HTML validator to claim a dirty hack isn't dirty because it validates. That behavior turns every website into some kind of acid test that is bound to break in every browser the web developer didn't bother to "optimize" for. That approach works fine until the limited set of browsers starts to differ significantly from what browsers are actually used in the real world.

Now that alternative platforms have emerged and get popular the demo−scene web developers have to admit they don't have the skills to deliver what HTML promised. They are specialized desktop web developers who are about as useless for serious mobile web development as graphic designers specialized in print. The print designer aims for the perfect proof, and the desktop web developer aims for the perfect screenshot. Thinking in a more abstract way about how markup behaves in different environments doesn't seem to be part of the skillset of the desktop web developer. And anyone lacking that skill will love to just create shiny stuff for the totally predictable environments of the iPhone and iPad and not realize what the full potential of the web was all about.

by Roland van Ipenburg
http://www.xs4all.nl/~ipenburg/blog/posts/work/2010/02/09/reality−distorted−open−standards/